

XII. PROJECT MAYFLOWER -- THE FIRST BOMBING PAUSE

This is Gravel ed. III, 362

A. The Background

Pressure for some form of bombing halt had mounted steadily throughout April and early May. As early as April 2, Canada's Prime Minister Lester Pearson, on his way to meet with President Johnson, had stopped off to make a speech in Philadelphia in which he suggested that the President should order a "pause" in the bombing of North Vietnam.

Pearson's gratuitous advice was particularly galling to the President because the pause had become the battle slogan of the anti-Vietnam movement. Students had picketed the LBJ Ranch in Texas, demanding a cessation of bombing. A massive teach-in had been scheduled for May 15 in Washington, with academicians who wanted withdrawal of American influence from the Asian mainland, ready to demand as a first step an immediate end of the bombing. Pressure for a pause was building up, too, in Congress among liberal Democrats. 116/ The U.N. Secretary General was on a continual bombing pause kick, with a proposal for a three month suspension of bombing in return for Hanoi's agreement to cease infiltration in South Vietnam. U Thant had told Ambassador Stevenson on April 24 that he believed such a gesture would facilitate renewed non-aligned pressure upon Hanoi to negotiate.

Evidently, however, the President was not impressed with the widespread clamor that such a gesture would evoke any response from Hanoi. He had responded favorably to the 17-Nation appeal in his April 7th speech, only to be answered with blunt rejection by Hanoi and Peking. The U.S. had responded favorably to the idea of a Cambodian Conference that would provide opportunities for "corridor contacts" with Communist powers on the Vietnam problem, but Peking had apparently blocked that initiative. Encouragement had been given to a UK approach to the Soviets in February looking toward consultations under Article 19 of the 1962 Geneva Accords, but no response from the USSR had been received. The Radhakrishnan proposal for a cease-fire along the 17th parallel, supervised by an "Afro-Asian Force" was being favorably considered by the U.S. only to be denounced as a "plot" by Peking and as an "offense" by Hanoi. Publicly, the President was plaintive:

There are those who frequently talk of negotiations and political settlement and that they believe this is the course we should pursue, and so do I. When they talk that way I say, welcome to the club. I want to negotiate. I would much rather talk than fight, and I think everyone would. Bring in who you want us to negotiate with. I have searched high and wide, and I am a reasonably good cowboy, and I can't even rope anybody and bring them in who is willing to talk and

settle this by negotiation. We send them messages through allies - one country, two countries, three countries, four or five countries - all have tried to be helpful. The distinguished British citizen, Mr. (Patrick Gordon) Walker, has been out there, and they say, we can't even talk to you. All our intelligence is unanimous in this one point, that they see no need for negotiation. They think they are winning and they have won and why should they sit down and give us something and settle with us. 117/

But while the public clamor persisted and became more and more difficult to ignore, the President was receiving intelligence assessments from Saigon and from Washington that tended to confirm his reading of Hanoi's disinterest in negotiations, but that provided him with a quite different argument for a bombing pause at this time; if the conflict was going to have to be expanded and bombing intensified before Hanoi would "come to reason," it would be easier and politically more palatable to do so after a pause, which would afford an opportunity for the enemy's intentions to be more clearly revealed.

On May 4, in response to an urgent request from Washington, Ambassador Taylor submitted a U.S. Mission "Assessment of DRV/VC Probable Courses of Action During the Next Three Months." The assessment confirmed the Washington view that Hanoi continued to have a very favorable view of its prospects for victory:

...Tone of statements emanating from Hanoi since February and March indicate that the DRV has not weakened in its determination to continue directing and supporting Viet Cong and seeking further intensification of war in the South.

From DRV viewpoint, outlook is probably still favorable despite air strikes on North. Although their general transportation system in North has been significantly damaged, thus somewhat reducing their infiltration capability, Hanoi may calculate it can accept level of damage being inflicted as reasonable price to pay for chance of victory in South. Viet Cong forces in south retain capability of taking local initiatives on ground, although they must accept cost of heavier losses from tactical air support, and their morale possibly has been reduced by recent developments. GVN force levels still are not adequate to cope with these Viet Cong capabilities. Despite relative longevity of Qut Govt., which marks improvement over previous recent Govts., political situation is still basically unstable. While military and civilian morale has risen, rumblings among generals continue, suspicion among political and religious groups persist and are subject to exploitation by communists. On balance, Hanoi probably believes it has considerable basis

for expectation that Viet Cong, who were clearly making progress as recently as February, can regain the initiative and, by the application of offensive power, can create an atmosphere in which negotiations favorable to the DRV can be instituted.

Given this situation, the report argued, the most probable course of action that Hanoi would pursue is to continue its efforts to expand its military action in the South, "including covert introduction of additional PAVN units on order of several regiments. This course offers ...the prospect of achieving major military gains capable of offsetting US/GVN application of air power. Such gains would expand Viet Cong areas of control and might lead to political demoralization in South Vietnam." 118/

A similarly unencouraging assessment had been submitted to the President by the Board of National Estimates on April 22. In a "highly sensitive, limited distribution" memorandum, the leading personalities of the U.S. intelligence community concurred in the prediction that:

If present US policies continue without the introduction of large additional forces or increased US air effort, the Communists are likely to hold to their existing policy of seeking victory in the local military struggle in South Vietnam. They will try to intensify that struggle, supporting it with additional men and equipment. At the same time, DRV air defenses will be strengthened through Soviet and perhaps Chinese aid.

If, however, the U.S. deepens its involvement by increasing its combat role and intensifying its air effort, the intelligence officers believed:

...that the Viet Cong, North Vietnam, and China would initially...try to offset the new enemy strength by stepping up the insurgency, reinforcing the Viet Cong with the men and equipment necessary. They would likely count on time being on their side and try to force the piecemeal engagement of US troops under conditions which might bog them down in jungle warfare, hoping to present the US with a de facto partition of the country. The Soviet Union... would almost certainly acquiesce in a decision by Hanoi to intensify the struggle. 119/

This lack of any real prospect of "give" on the enemy's part was also confirmed by Admiral Raborn, shortly after he had succeeded John McCone as Director of Central Intelligence. On the day of Raborn's swearing-in (April 28), the President had given him a letter from McCone (apparently worded along the lines of his memorandum described in Section IX.E. of this study) which McCone had handed to the President as his last official act. The President had asked Raborn to prepare

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some one is playing games with us? (cf Gr. III.364)

his own comments on McCone's views. Raborn's comments, circulated to Secretaries Rusk and McNamara on May 6, included the following:

Our limited bombing of the North and our present ground force build-up in the South are not likely to exert sufficient pressure on the enemy to cause him to meet our present terms in the foreseeable future. I note very recent evidence which suggests that our military pressures are becoming somewhat more damaging to the enemy within South Vietnam, but I am inclined to doubt that this damage is increasing at a rate which will bring him quickly to the conference table.

With particular reference to McCone's recommendation that the US add much heavier air action against the North to its planned combat force deployment to the South, Raborn indicated his agreement, and expressed his belief that such an action would have the following consequences:

The DRV is, in my view, unlikely to engage in meaningful discussions at any time in coming months until US air attacks have begun to damage or destroy its principal economic and military targets. I thus concur with the USIB's judgment of 18 February 1965, that, given such US punishment, the enemy would be "somewhat more likely" to decide to make some effort to secure a respite, rather than to intensify the struggle further and accept the consequent risks.

And then he added the following advice:

Insofar as possible, we should try to manage any program of expanded bombings in ways which (1) would leave the DRV an opportunity to explore negotiations without complete loss of face, (2) would not preclude any Soviet pressures on Hanoi to keep the war from expanding, and (3) would not suddenly produce extreme world pressures against us. In this connection, the timing and circumstances in which the bombings were extended northward could be of critical importance, particularly in light of the fact that there have been some indications of differing views between Moscow, Peiping, and Hanoi. For example, it would probably be advantageous to expand bombings after, not before, some major new VC move (e.g., obvious concentration for imminent attack on Da Nang or Kontum) and after, not before, any current possibilities of serious negotiations have been fully tested. And such bombings should not be so regular as to leave no interval for the Communists to make concessions with some grace. Indeed, we should keep in mind the possibility of a pause at some appropriate time, which could serve to test the Communist intentions and to exploit any differences on their side. (Emphasis supplied)

One other consideration may have entered into the President's bombing pause calculus at this time. On April 5, a TROJAN HORSE photography mission had revealed the first SA-2 SAM site under construction fifteen miles SSE of Hanoi, confirming the long-rumored shipment of Soviet surface-to-air missiles to North Vietnam. 120/ Moreover, the SAMs were only the most dramatic form of considerably increased quantities of modern military equipment beginning to be furnished to the DRV by the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was now in the process of becoming visibly committed to assisting North Vietnam in resisting U.S. attacks on its territory, and a more direct confrontation of US and USSR military force was rapidly approaching. Indeed, the Joint Chiefs had indicated, on April 14, their desire to obtain approval for air strikes against the sites on short notice as they become operational, had estimated, on May 6, that the first site construction could be completed by May 15, and had instructed CINCPAC to commence planning to conduct air strikes against that site. 121/ A decision involving a major Soviet "flashpoint," therefore, would soon have to be faced, and the President may well have wished to provide a prior opportunity for a quiet Hanoi backdown, before proceeding with more forceful military activity.

B. Setting the Stage

On the evening of May 10 the President sent a personal FLASH message to Ambassador Taylor, 122/ informing him that he (the President) had decided to call a brief halt to air attacks in the North and instructing him to obtain Premier Quat's agreement to the plan. The text of the message follows:

I have learned from Bob McNamara that nearly all ROLLING THUNDER operations for this week can be completed by Wednesday noon, Washington time. This fact and the days of Buddha's birthday seem to me to provide an excellent opportunity for a pause in air attacks which might go into next week and which I could use to good effect with world opinion.

My plan is not to announce this brief pause but simply to call it privately to the attention of Moscow and Hanoi as soon as possible and tell them that we shall be watching closely to see whether they respond in any way. My current plan is to report publicly after the pause ends on what we have done.

Could you see Quat right away on Tuesday and see if you can persuade him to concur in this plan. I would like to associate him with me in this decision if possible, but I would accept a simple concurrence or even willingness not to oppose my decision. In general, I think it important that he and I should act together in such matters, but I have no desire to embarrass him if it is politically difficult for him to join actively in a pause over Buddha's birthday.

We have noted your [recent cables] but do not yet have your appreciation of the political effect in Saigon of acting around Buddha's birthday. From my point of view it is a great advantage to use Buddha's birthday to mark the first days of the pause here, if it is at all possible in political terms for Quat. I assume we could undertake to enlist the Archbishop and the Runcio in calming the Catholics.

You should understand that my purpose in this plan is to begin to clear a path either toward restoration of peace or toward increased military action, depending upon the reaction of the Communists. We have amply demonstrated our determination and our commitment in the last two months, and I now wish to gain some flexibility.

I know that this is a hard assignment on short notice, but there is no one who can bring it off better.

I have kept this plan in the tightest possible circle here and wish you to inform no one but Alexis Johnson. After I have your report of Quat's reaction I will make a final decision and it will be communicated promptly to senior officers concerned.

Ambassador Taylor promptly relayed the President's plan to Quat, whose major objection was to the notion of linking the pause in any way with Buddha's birthday. Taylor reported this objection to Washington 123/ and received the following additional instructions from the Department in return. 124/

We have decided here to go ahead commencing on Thursday [May 13] for period of approximately 5 - 7 days. Orders through military channels will place stand-down on basis "in order to observe reaction of DRV rail and road transportation systems" and will order increase in photo recce of DRV and bombing within SVN. You should tell Westmoreland true basis for his personal use only so that you and he and Alex Johnson remain the only three Americans in Saigon aboard. We have informed Dobrynin tonight and are instructing Kohler to convey message to Hanoi through DRV Ambassador in Moscow. I will also be telling British and Canadian Foreign Ministers personally tomorrow and we will convey message to Menzies through Embassy here. However, each of these being informed only at highest levels and their Saigon representatives will not repeat not be witting.

You should take following actions:

1. Inform Quat we are going ahead. You should not specify period but let us know if he raises question or still insists on as short a period as 4 - 5 days. Tell him we will definitely

~~refrain at all times from associating action with Buddha's birthday~~ and that our initial plan will be to refer all press queries to Washington and to hold as long as possible simply to operational factors as explanation. You should raise with him question of what he will tell generals urging in strongest terms that he tell them only what we are saying through military channel and preferably delay even this until question arises. If Quat raises question of what we are saying to Communist side, you will have copies tonight's talk with Dobrynin and instructions to Kohler by septels and may draw generally on these for his personal use only.

2. To deal with any possibility adverse Catholic reaction you should inform Archbishop and/or Runcio very privately that any variation in actions in forthcoming period will be USG decisions not related in any way to Buddha's birthday or any appeal or issue connected with it. You may of course also reiterate that any such variations have no effect whatever on our determination as clearly shown in recent months. We leave timing this approach to you but believe it should be done earliest before any speculation arises.

3. At appropriate time you should instruct Zorthian to report simply that no operations other than reconnaissance were conducted on each day and to refer press queries, preferably by indirection, to Washington.

A few hours later, Secretary McNamara, with the concurrence of Secretary Rusk and McGeorge Bundy, sent the following FLASH joint State/Defense message through military channels to Ambassador Taylor, CINCPAC and COMUSMACV: 125/

In order to observe reaction of DRV rail and road transportation systems, bombing (including armed reconnaissance and other strike operations) of targets within DRV will cease for several days effective 2400 12 May Saigon time. CINCPAC should issue the necessary instructions to US forces and Ambassador should seek to obtain compliance of VNAF.

During the period in which bombing operations are suspended, photo and eyeball reconnaissance flights over DRV, in so far as they can be carried out without flak suppression escorts and within currently approved rules relating to altitudes and latitudes, will be increased to the level required to permit a thorough study of lines of communication. The bombing sorties which would have been directed against the DRV during this period, to the extent practical, will be targeted against appropriate targets in South Vietnam.

ROLLING THUNDER 15 as outlined in JCS 1736 has been approved. It is to be executed upon receipt of appropriate execution orders.

Press guidance for the period during which bombing operations are suspended will be furnished in a separate message.

Acting on these instructions, Taylor saw Quat in Saigon on the morning of May 12, and reported back as follows: 126/

Along with Alex Johnson, I called this morning to convey to Quat the information contained in Department's instructions. I told him that his views with regard to linking the pause with Buddha's birthday had been accepted and that this element had been removed from the plan. I explained that the pause begins tomorrow (Saigon time) and will continue for several days. As he did not raise any question with regard to the precise duration, I did not elaborate. He liked the military justification for the pause as explained in REFTEL and undertook to remain within this language in dealing with his generals. I assured him that General Westmoreland would do the same in his military contacts.

We explained to Quat how the message was being conveyed to the USSR and Hanoi. He had no comment except to express doubt that any detectable change in DRV conduct will take place during the suspension of attacks.

As for comment to the press, he repeated his intention to ward off queries by references to "Operational Requirements."

While securing Quat's support has been somewhat easier than I had anticipated, I am sure that he and his colleagues will become uneasy very quickly if this pause runs beyond the "four to five days" which Quat has indicated to be acceptable from his point of view. I would hope that our purposes can have been fulfilled within the five day period.

With regard to paragraph 2 [of Department's instructions], Johnson and I feel that it is unnecessary and probably undesirable to approach Archbishop Binh or the Nuncio at this time. We will watch closely the local reaction to the suspension and convey the message to the Catholic leadership, if necessary, at a timely moment.

Much additional attention was lavished by Washington upon maintaining near-absolute secrecy, preserving a plausible front vis-à-vis the press, and other aspects of stage management. On May 12, the operation was given the codeword WYFLOHER, and all communications on it were thenceforth to be slanted upon that indicator. Besides Taylor and Johnson, the only American Ambassadors informed of the political purpose

of MAYFLOWER were William Sullivan in Vientiane, Foy Kohler in Moscow, and Winthrop Brown in Seoul. The latter only for the purpose of informing President Park Chung Hee who was about to embark on a state visit to Washington and who, the Department felt, should be forewarned so that he might more effectively fend off press probings.

On the evening of May 11, Secretary Rusk made two moves designed to inform "the other side" of the fact that a bombing halt was being called and of its political purpose:

1. He sent a cable 127/ to Foy Kohler in Moscow, instructing him to make urgent contact with the DRV Ambassador in Moscow to convey a carefully prepared message to him, as quoted below. The cable set forth the instructions and rationale as follows:

...We are using you as channel to avoid using Soviets as intermediaries and also to insure that message is accurately and directly delivered. We leave appropriate method of arranging contact to you and are not concerned if Soviets should become aware you are making such contact. You should of course make maximum effort avoid any attention by any third party.

Message you should deliver should be oral but confirmed by written piece of paper which you should hand to Ambassador with request he deliver message to Hanoi. Message is as follows:

BEGIN TEXT. The highest authority in this Government has asked me to inform Hanoi that there will be no air attacks on North Viet-Nam for a period beginning at noon, Washington time, Wednesday, May 12, and running into next week.

In this decision the United States Government has taken account of repeated suggestions from various quarters, including public statements by Hanoi representatives, that there can be no progress toward peace while there are air attacks on North Viet-Nam. The United States Government remains convinced that the underlying cause of trouble in Southeast Asia is armed action against the people and Government of South Vietnam by forces whose actions can be decisively affected from North Vietnam. The United States will be very watchful to see whether in this period of pause there are significant reductions in such armed actions by such forces. (The United States must emphasize that the road toward the end of armed attacks against the people and Government of Vietnam is the only road which will permit the Government of Vietnam (and the Government of the United States) to bring a permanent end to their attacks on North Vietnam.)...

In taking this action the United States is well aware of the risk that a temporary suspension of these air attacks may

be misunderstood as an indication of weakness, and it is therefore necessary for me to point out that if this pause should be misunderstood in this fashion, by any party, it would be necessary to demonstrate more clearly than ever, after the pause ended, that the United States is determined not to accept aggression without reply in Vietnam. Moreover, the United States must point out that the decision to end air attacks for this limited trial period is one which it must be free to reverse if at any time in the coming days there should be actions by the other side in Vietnam which required immediate reply.

But my Government is very hopeful that there will be no such misunderstanding and that this first pause in the air attacks may meet with a response which will permit further and more extended suspension of this form of military action in the expectation of equally constructive actions by the other side in the future. END TEXT.

2. He summoned Soviet Ambassador Anatol Dobrynin to his office in the State Department and made virtually the same oral statement to him, confirmed by a parallel written version handed to him. Rusk, that same evening described the meeting to Foy Kohler in a second cable, 128/ sent immediately after the message quoted above:

I explained we were not indicating any precise number of days, that we retained freedom of action, and that we would convey similar message to Hanoi. I also said we would make no announcement although we expected press pressures, and made clear our action related only to strikes of any sort and not to continued reconnaissance. (Paper itself makes clear action confined to DRV and does not include Laos or SVN.)

I also said we did not know what to expect but that Hanoi knows what it is doing and can find a way to make its response clear.

Dobrynin noted we were merely informing Soviets and was clearly relieved we not asking them to act as intermediary. Asked about my trip to Vienna and indicated there might be further conversations there Saturday with Gromyko. Asked basically whether action represented any change in fundamental US position.

I replied that it did not and that this should be no surprise.

I reviewed recent indications that Cambodia conference blocked by Peiping despite favorable mention in DRV-Moscow communique and that three-party talks on Laos likewise in

abeyance apparently following Peiping and perhaps Hanoi pressure. President on April 7 had tried open up discourse but thus far channels blocked. If attacks on DRV were part of problem, Communist response to present action might open up channels.

Dobrynin said he thought we would get some answer but could not predict what.

I underscored importance action not be misunderstood in Hanoi. Hanoi appears to have impression they may succeed, but US will not get tired or be affected by very small domestic opposition or by international pressures. Hanoi cannot rely on Saigon stability. They may have wrong ideas on these points and important they not misunderstand our action.

Dobrynin responded he saw no danger of misunderstanding but problem was to find way.

Parallel with the Secretary's diplomatic moves, the President made a major public address on the first day of the bombing pause, in which he made no reference to the pause, but in which he urged Hanoi to consider a "political solution." The speech, embracing the theme of the "three faces of war" (1. armed conflict, 2. diplomacy and politics, and 3. human need) contained the following passage:

The second face of war in Viet-Nam is the quest for a political solution - the face of diplomacy and politics - of the ambitions and the interests of other nations. We know, as our adversaries should also know, that there is no purely military solution in sight for either side. We are ready for unconditional discussions. Most of the non-Communist nations of the world favor such unconditional discussions. And it would clearly be in the interest of North Vietnam to now come to the conference table. For them the continuation of war, without talks, means only damage without conquest. Communist China apparently desires the war to continue whatever the cost to their allies. Their target is not merely South Viet-Nam; it is Asia. Their objective is not the fulfillment of Vietnamese nationalism; it is to erode and to discredit America's ability to help prevent Chinese domination over all of Asia.

In this domination they will never succeed. 129/

C. Transmitting the Messages

Foy Kohler in Moscow, upon receiving the Secretary's instructions, directed his Deputy Chief of Mission to telephone the North Vietnamese Embassy on the morning of May 12 to request an urgent appointment for Ambassador Kohler with the North Vietnamese Ambassador. The latter, however,

declined to receive the American Ambassador "in view of the absence of diplomatic relations between our two countries," and suggested instead that the "important, high level private message" from the US Government which Ambassador Kohler wished to communicate to the DRV Ambassador be sent to the Soviet Government "in its capacity as Co-Chairman of the Geneva Conference."

Kohler felt it would not be productive to press the DRV embassy further, and cabled the Department for instructions as to which of two alternatives he should pursue: "(1) Transmit message by letter via messenger to DRV Ambassador; or (2) seek appointment with Acting Foreign Minister Kuznetsov to convey message." 130/

The Department's reply was as follows:

Believe you should pursue both alternatives urgently, explaining to Kuznetsov (who will by now have heard from Dobrynin) that you recognize reluctance of Soviets to act as intermediary and are asking solely that Soviets transmit message to DRV Ambassador in accordance with DRV suggestion. 131/

Kohler acted promptly on both alternatives. He transmitted the "oral" communication to the DRV Ambassador under cover of a letter signed by Kohler, which read as follows:

In accordance with the suggestion made by a member of your staff today, I am attempting to reach the Acting Foreign Minister tonight.

Since this may not be possible and because of its importance, I enclose the message I had hoped to be able to convey to you personally earlier today.

However, though hand-delivered by an American embassy employee to a DRV employee, the communication was returned the following morning in a plain envelope addressed simply Embassy of US of A. 132/

At the same time, Kohler sought an urgent appointment with Acting Foreign Minister Kuznetsov (Gromyko being out of town) but Kuznetsov was not available and Kohler was able to see only Deputy Foreign Minister Firyubin. The latter, after some temporizing, flatly refused his government's services as an intermediary and lectured Kohler at length upon the US misconception of the real nature of the conflict in Vietnam. Kohler's account of the conversation follows: 133/

I informed Firyubin that as he must know from report of Dobrynin's conversation with Secretary, US Government has made decision which we hoped would be both understood and not misunderstood. I had been informed by several high

Soviet sources that decision we had taken was precisely what was called for but none had been in position to predict reaction. Our purpose in reaching this significant decision was to attempt to ascertain if a way could be found to peaceful solution of current crisis in Southeast Asia. We had hoped we would be able to deliver oral communication conveying this decision to DRV authorities and I had attempted to do so today through DRV Ambassador. Unfortunately Ambassador let it be known that he did not wish to receive me personally and when his embassy was informed that the message I sought to deliver was of extreme importance, it was suggested that we transmit the message through the Soviet Government in its capacity as Geneva Co-Chairman. It was because of these circumstances that I had found it necessary to disturb Mr. Firyubin tonight. I pointed out that although DRV Ambassador had refused to receive me, embassy had succeeded in delivering a copy of oral communication to employee of DRV embassy earlier this evening (2015 Local) who agreed to bring it to attention of Ambassador (communication as set forth in DEPTTEL 3103 then translated in full for Firyubin with sole interruption being Firyubin's inquiry if cessation attacks applied only to those from air -- which I confirmed.) After receiving confirmation from me that communication was of oral nature, Firyubin said he viewed communication as based on old erroneous conception on which US has proceeded, a conception which precludes US recognizing that the South Vietnamese people are fighting for their freedom and are struggling against aggression and control by Saigon puppets. Furthermore it indicated to Firyubin that we continued to view the picture incorrectly when we referred again to the struggle in South Vietnam as being organized and directed by the DRV. The absurdity of this view, he said, is obvious and naturally the Soviet Government cannot agree with it as it has made clear in numerous statements. Firyubin could only view the communication as repetition of the threat against the DRV -- now a threat of renewed and expanded aggression. This was the only way he could interpret the reference to the risk that a suspension of attacks involved. Obviously we are suffering from a gross misunderstanding if we think that such aggression will go unpunished, without response. The only constructive approach to a peaceful settlement of the situation in South Vietnam was to end the aggression, recall troops from South Vietnam and give the Vietnamese people the right to choose their own form of Government -- a choice which can be made freely only if the so-called specialists should be withdrawn and their opportunity of exercising influence on the Vietnamese thus removed. Firyubin said that he well acquainted with the countries and peoples of Southeast Asia; he therefore was aware and could understand the feelings caused by our actions there as well as the reaction in many other parts of the world.

I told Firyubin I had asked to see him to put a very simple question to him. Does the Soviet Government agree to transmit the oral communication to the DRV? I said this was the whole purpose of my visit.

Firyubin said the DRV embassy had not put such a request to the Soviet Government. I must agree that for Soviets to act as intermediary between us and DRV is very unusual. Naturally he would report my request to his Government and if the DRV should request this service he would not exclude the possibility of transmitting the communication to the DRV Government. Meanwhile he would be interested in knowing just how the DRV embassy had responded to our approach.

I again described for Firyubin our efforts to deliver the message to the DRV through its embassy in Moscow and told him that the end result was a suggestion by the embassy that we transmit the message through the Soviet Government in its capacity as Geneva Co-Chairman. Firyubin repeated his promise to report my request to his Government and to inform me of the results.

While the conversation continued in this vein, Firyubin had passed a note to a Foreign Office assistant, Kornienko, who attended him, and the latter left the room. After some time, Kornienko reappeared and handed a note to Firyubin, which the latter read carefully. After reading the note, Firyubin said flatly that the Soviet Government would not transmit the U.S. Government's message to the DRV, that the DRV embassy had not requested this service and that it was the U.S. responsibility to find a convenient way of passing the message. Kohler's account continues:

I said I wished to understand him correctly. Was he rejecting my request to transmit the communication to the DRV?

He said this was a correct understanding of the Soviet Government position. We must ourselves find the way.

I said that what I was seeking was the cooperation of the Soviet Government and Firyubin's remarks indicated clearly that the Soviet Government was refusing this. Firyubin said, "I am not a postman" and again said we could find our own ways of transmitting messages.

I pointed out to Firyubin that the cooperation I had requested is a well-known and not unprecedented process in international diplomacy. I had great difficulty in reconciling Soviet Government refusal to cooperate with its declaration in support of peaceful settlement of disputed questions.

Kornienko chimed in that he had recalled statement by both the President and Secretary of State on several occasions that the U.S. Government has channels for transmitting messages direct to Hanoi. On this the conversation ended but it should be noted that Firubin made no effort to return to me the text of the oral communication which I had handed him at the outset of the conversation.

After further reflection on his meeting with Firubin, Kohler sent a follow-on message to Washington that afternoon, 134/ in which he sought to present the Soviet position with some sympathy and to promote an understanding of the Soviet rebuff in the light of the "rather strenuous nature" of the document we were asking them to transmit. Kohler's comments were as follows:

I came away from my meeting with Firubin last night with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I was annoyed at the apparent Soviet rebuff of an effort to take heat out of admittedly dangerous situation in SEA and impatient with flimsy rationale for Soviet refusal offered by Firubin. On the other hand, I could understand, if not sympathize with, Soviet sensitivity, given Chicom eagerness to adduce proof of their charges of collusion against Soviets and, frankly, given rather strenuous nature of document they were being asked to transmit to DRV.

Implicit in latter view, of course, is assumption that Soviets in fact want bombing to stop, are genuinely concerned at possibilities escalation, and are interested in working out some sort of modus vivendi which would take heat out of situation while not undercutting their own position in Commie world as loyal socialist ally. We cannot be sure that this is way Soviets view situation, and it entirely possible they so confident our ultimate defeat in Vietnam that no gesture on our part would meet with encouraging response. Believe at this point, however, we lose nothing assuming Soviets have not completely forgotten lesson Cuba and there is some flexibility in Soviet position which we should seek to exploit.

I would hope, therefore, we would not regard Firubin's reaction last night as evidence conscious hardening of Soviet attitude. It may simply be reflection of bind Soviets find themselves in at moment. Meanwhile, we can feel sure message is already in DRV hands -- copies now available thru Dobrynin, Firubin, and DRV embassy here -- and I would suggest we go through with original plan and be on alert, both here and on the scene for any signs reaction from other side. Seen from here, we would lose nothing by doing so; and we gain at least with our friends and the unaligned.

By this time (1:00 p.m. March 13, Moscow time), though Kohler was not aware of it, the bombing pause had already been in effect for seventeen hours. It had gone into effect as planned at 2400 on March 12, Saigon time, and the Department so informed Kohler. The Department also decided, in spite of Kohler's confidence that the U.S. "oral" communication had reached Hanoi, to make doubly sure by asking the U.K. Government to instruct its Consul in Hanoi to transmit the same message, in writing, to his normal contact in the DRV. Informed by the Department that this step was about to be taken, Kohler expressed his dissatisfaction with the character and tone of the communication by recommending that, in any resubmission, the message be shortened and softened:

...I would recommend we shorten and revise wording of "oral" communication to DRV if we plan resubmit through British Consul Hanoi. If cast in present form, I think we are simply inviting rebuff, and exercise Hanoi would prove as fruitless as our efforts in Moscow. Something along lines following would get essential message across:

BEGIN TEXT. The highest authority in this Government has asked me to inform Hanoi that there will be no air attacks on North Vietnam for a period beginning at noon, Washington time, Wednesday, May 12 and running into next week.

In this decision the United States Government has taken account of repeated suggestions from various quarters, including public statements by Hanoi representatives, that there can be no progress toward peace while there are air attacks on North Vietnam.

The United States Government expects that in consequence of this action the DRV will show similar restraint. If this should not prove to be the case, then the United States Government will feel compelled to take such measures as it feels are necessary to deal with the situation in Vietnam.
END TEXT. 135/

Kohler's recommendation was not accepted, and the message was transmitted to the DRV by the British Consul in Hanoi in its original form. As in the Moscow case, the message was shortly thereafter returned to the sender, ostensibly unopened.

As a footnote to the "unopened letter" episodes, it may be worth noting that Canadian ICE Commissioner Blair Seaborn, on an early-June visit to Hanoi, was approached by the Czech Ambassador to the DRV, who recounted to him the story of Kohler's unsuccessful effort to deliver the message to the DRV Ambassador in Moscow, with the message having been returned ostensibly unopened. The Czech Ambassador said "everybody" in Hanoi knew the story. 136/

D. Awaiting a Response = 9m III, 375

While the Administration expected little in the way of a positive Hanoi response, a watchful eye was kept for any signals or actions that might suggest North Vietnamese or Soviet receptivity to any further diplomatic explorations. Such signals as were received, however, were entirely negative. On May 15 a Hanoi English language broadcast noted Western news reports of the bombing cessation, terming them "a worn out trick of deceit and threat..." On the same day, in a conversation with British Foreign Secretary Michael Stewart in Vienna, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko indicated the USSR's disinclination to participate in any negotiations on Indochina.

In the meantime, in Saigon, the U.S. Mission was hard at work trying to clarify its own thinking -- and that of Washington -- on the persuasive, or rather coercive, possibilities of bombing pauses. In particular, the Mission was hoping to link the intensity of US bombing after the resumption closely to the level of VC activity during the pause. The purpose would be to make it clear to Hanoi that what we were trying to accomplish with our bombing was to get the DRV to cease directing and supporting the VC and to get VC units to cease their military activities in the South. In this approach, a downward trend in VC activities would be "rewarded" in a similar manner by decreasing US bombing. Thus it was hoped that, during the bombing pause, the DRV would offer the first step in a series of events which might ultimately "lead to the termination of hostilities on satisfactory [i.e., U.S.] terms, without engaging in formal negotiations."

Ambassador Taylor described this approach to Washington in a lengthy cable 137/ concurred in by Deputy Ambassador Johnson and General Westmoreland. The Ambassador recognized that there were one or two minor pitfalls in the scheme, but seemed undaunted in his confidence that US bombing could be designed to have powerful coercive effects. Taylor admitted that:

Any success in carrying out such a scenario ~~would~~ obviously depend on a considerable amount of cooperation from the DRV side based on a conviction arising from self-interest that the DRV must accept a settlement which excludes the conquest of SVN by NVN. There is little likelihood that the Hanoi leaders are yet ready to reach such a conclusion, but a rigorous application of air attacks at a tempo related to Hanoi/VC activities accompanied by pressure on the ground to compel the VC to engage in incidents or retreat appears to us to have possibilities. Conceivably, these ground operations might eventually result in herding VC units into "safe havens"...Whatever its other weaknesses, such a program would eliminate in large measure the danger which we may now be facing of equating our bombing activity to VC initiated incidents, and of seeming to suggest that we will stop bombing for good if the VC will simply lie low.

A quite different approach to a settlement was proposed in a rather puzzling informal contact between Pierre Salinger and two somewhat shadowy Soviet officials in Moscow. On the evening of May 11 (i.e., one full day prior to the inauguration of the bombing pause) Salinger, who was in Moscow at the time on private movie production business, was invited to dinner by Mikhail Sagatelyan, whom Salinger had known in Washington during the Kennedy years as the TASS Bureau Chief, and who was at this time assigned to TASS headquarters in Moscow. Salinger reported his conversation to Ambassador Kohler who related it to Secretary Rush in a cable 138/ as follows:

cf. Salinger
in Aug. 72

Sagatelyan probed Salinger hard as to whether he was on some kind of covert mission and seemed unconvinced despite latter's reiterated denials. In any case, Sagatelyan, protesting he was speaking personally, talked at length about Viet-Nam. He wanted Salinger's opinion on hypothetical formula for solution approximately on following lines:

1. US would announce publicly temporary suspension of bombing DRV;
2. DRV or USSR or both would make statement hailing suspension as step toward reasonable solution;
3. Soviet Union would intercede with Viet Cong to curtail military activities;
4. De facto cease fire would thus be accomplished.
5. Conference would be called on related subject (not specifically Viet-Nam). Viet Cong would not be participant but have some kind of observer or corridor status (this followed Salinger's expression of opinion US Government would never accept Viet Cong as participant in any conference).
6. New agreement would be worked out on Viet-Nam providing for broader-based SVN Government not including direct Viet Cong participation but including elements friendly to Viet Cong.

In a follow-up dinner conversation between Salinger and Sagatelyan two nights later, in which a Foreign Office representative, identified only as "Vassily Sergeyevich" also participated, the Soviet interlocutors generally confirmed the proposal quoted above, modifying points three and four by suggesting that an actual cease fire could take place only after initiation of negotiations and that a cease fire would in fact be the first item on the agenda of any negotiations. 139/ Additional items of interest were reported by Kohler as follows:

Soviet interlocutors talked at length about President Kennedy's forbearance post-Cuba period and broadly implied that Soviets now interested in reciprocating such forbearance. It was clear from their remarks that Soviets assume we would welcome some avenue of withdrawal so long as this would not involve loss of American prestige.

Soviets informed Salinger that Soviet Government had received a "Rusk proposal" with regard Vietnam but would not answer proposal or act on it in any way until Soviet Government had some idea as to how current exercise with Salinger would turn out...

As to mechanics of carrying on exercise, Sagatelyan suggested Salinger might convey proposal to US Government through embassy Paris and he himself would fly immediately Paris in order receive from Salinger there any official reaction. Alternatively, if Salinger wished to proceed direct Washington, contact could be designated there, probably either Zinchuk (Soviet embassy counselor) or Vadvichenko (TASS Washington Bureau).

Throughout conversation Soviets made clear to Salinger that because of sensitive Soviet position any progress toward political settlement Vietnam problem must be initiated and carried through, at least in preliminary stages, on basis unofficial contacts, clear implication being if leak should occur or if scheme should go awry, Soviet Government would be in position disavow whole affair. At same time, it was clear from remarks as well as presence of Foreign Office representative that proposal by Sagatelyan had official backing.

Salinger had one further contact with Sagatelyan and Vassily the following day, where it became apparent that the Soviet officials' interest in the proposal had waned. By the time Salinger had returned to Washington and saw Ambassador Thompson at the State Department on May 18, the Soviet disinterest in any role for themselves during the current bombing pause had been made clear through other channels, and Salinger's contacts were not further pursued.

Of these other channels, the most important (and also the most casual) was a brief Kaffeeklatsch between Secretary Rusk and Foreign Minister Gromyko at the Austrian Chancellor's residence in Vienna on May 15. The proceedings are described in a Rusk cable 140 to Undersecretary Balk as follows:

Have just returned from Chancellor's lunch for visiting dignitaries. After lunch Gromyko and I and our wives were at a small table for coffee. I commented to Gromyko that we

were in something of a dilemma about Southeast Asia. We felt there might be some value in a serious exchange of views between our two Governments but that we did not know whether they themselves wished to discuss it.

He commented with considerable seriousness that the Soviets will not negotiate about Viet-Nam. He said there were other parties involved in that situation and that the United States would have to find ways of establishing contact with them, and he specifically mentioned the DRV. He said they will continue to support North Viet-Nam and will do so "decisively." He then made reference to a fellow socialist country under attack.

I interrupted to point out that the problem was not that a socialist country was subject to attack but that a socialist country was attacking someone else. I said that American military forces are in South Vietnam solely because North Vietnam has been sending large numbers of men and arms into the South.

He denied these facts in the usual ritual fashion but added that in any event it was not up to the United States to be the judge between Vietnamese. I reminded him that he must know by now that a North Korean attack against South Koreans would not be accepted merely because both were Korean. He merely commented that there were important differences between those two situations.

He referred to Dobrynin's talk with me and said that the temporary suspension of bombing was "insulting." I said I could not understand this in view of the fact that Hanoi, Peiping and Moscow have all talked about the impossibility of discussions while bombing was going on.

At this point Chancellor Klaus joined the table to express great happiness that Gromyko and I were sitting together. Neither one of us dispelled his illusion.

I do not know whether Gromyko will pursue the matter further when the four foreign ministers meet briefly with Quaison-Sackey this afternoon or when we all assemble for the opera tonight.

Thompson and I both have the impression that Gromyko's attitude clearly means that the Salinger talk was of little substance and that we should now merely consider what kind of signal we wish to get back by way of Salinger as a part of the closing out process.

I do not believe that we should assume from Gromyko's remarks that we ourselves should not put to Moscow our own most serious views of the situation, whether they are willing to discuss them or not. It is quite clear, however, that Gromyko wanted me to believe that they are not prepared to work toward a settlement in Hanoi and Peiping and that, indeed, unless we abandon our effort in South Viet-Nam there will be very serious consequences ahead.

E. Resuming the Bombing

Having thus been unmistakably rebuffed by Moscow, Hanoi, and Peking, the President determined on the evening of May 16 that the bombing raids should be resumed, beginning on the morning of May 18 Saigon time. In addition to the ROLLING THUNDER XV execute message sent by the JCS to CINCPAC on the 16th, Secretary Rusk sent messages of a political nature to Saigon, London, and Ottawa on May 17, so that the action could be cleared with Premier Quat (which Taylor promptly accomplished), and so that the foreign ministers of the Commonwealth countries would be informed beforehand. 141/

You should see Fon Min immediately to inform that beginning Tuesday morning, Saigon time, bombing of North Viet-Nam will be resumed by US and South Vietnamese forces, marking the end of a five-day suspension

You should convey message from me that we regret that the reception of the other side to the idea of a pause was not merely negative but hostile. Gromyko told Rusk that our message to Dobrynin on subject was "insulting." Nevertheless we do not exclude possibility of other such attempts in future.

There will be no public announcement of the resumption of bombing. When press questions are asked, it will be pointed out that there have been and may again be periods when no bombing will take place in response to operational factors and that we do not discuss these operational questions.

Ambassador Kohler, upon receiving word of the resumption, suggested that the US might inform the NATO Council and the 17 non-aligned nations of our actions, in advance of any resumption, to underline the seriousness of the President's response to the Unaligned Appeal. The Department, however, responded negatively to Kohler's suggestion: 142/

There will be no official public statement from here concerning suspension or resumption. Decision at highest levels is to avoid any discussion Project MAYFLOWER, which now

concluded, outside of restricted circle designated when Project begun. Despite disappointing response, we wish to keep open channel with Soviets on this subject and we hope eventually with DRV via Soviets. We feel that use of this channel another time might be precluded if we appear to have carried through Project MAYFLOWER solely for credit it might earn us with third parties and public opinion in general. Therefore we would not now wish inform NATO Council and 17 Non-aligned countries.

Only British, Canadians, Australians, UN Secretary General and Korean President Park (here on state visit) were in fact informed in advance of resumption bombing and also of negative outcome of soundings of other side.

In addition to this limited circle of allied intimates, a larger circle of friendly governments was provided with Ambassadorial briefings on the bombing pause after the resumption. An instruction to this effect went out to American ambassadors in New Delhi, Tokyo, Bangkok, Vientiane, Manila, Wellington, and Paris: 143/

You should take first opportunity see Pri. Minister, Fon Min, or other appropriate high level official to inform him that the U.S. and South Vietnamese Governments suspended bombing against North Viet-Nam for a period of five days which ended on May 18. The initiation of this pause in bombing was accompanied by an approach by us to the Governments of the Soviet Union and North Viet-Nam which took note of repeated calls from that side for cessation of bombing and their statements that discussions could not take place while bombing continued. Unfortunately the reception of our approach was not merely negative but hostile...In view of the complete absence of any constructive response, we have decided the bombing must be resumed. Nevertheless we do not exclude possibility of other such attempts in the future.

You should add that the record of the past several weeks is discouraging in that Communists and particularly Peking appear intent on rejecting every effort from whatever quarter to open up contacts and conversations which might lead to a resolution of the Viet-Nam situation. The rejection of President Johnson's April 7 proposals for unconditional discussions, of the appeal of the Seventeen Non-aligned countries and of President Radhakrishnan's proposal all illustrate the point together with Peking and Hanoi's obvious efforts to obstruct the convening of a conference on Cambodia. We will nevertheless continue to explore all possibilities for constructive discussion, meanwhile maintaining with the Government of South Viet-Nam our joint military efforts to preserve that country's freedom.

On the evening of May 18, the DRV Foreign Ministry issued a statement denouncing the gesture as a "deceitful maneuver designed to pave the way for new U.S. acts of war," and insisted U.S. planes had, since May 12, repeatedly intruded into DRV airspace "for spying, provocative and strafing activities."

Communist China's Foreign Ministry issued a statement May 21 fully endorsing Hanoi's position and denouncing the suspension with characteristic intemperateness.

F. Aftermath

A still somewhat ambiguous diplomatic move was made by Hanoi on May 18, shortly after the bombing had been resumed.

It appears that in Paris, on the morning of May 18, Mai Van Bo, head of the DRV economic delegation there, approached the Asian Direction of the Quai d'Orsay to explain the reasons for the DRV's rejection of the Radhakrishnan proposals (involving a cordon sanitaire by Afro-Asian troops along the 17th parallel). More important, however, Bo explained with text in hand that the Pham Van Dong Four Points, enunciated on April 8, should not be isolated from the declaration that had followed the four points. He then softened the language of that declaration by pointing out that the four points constituted the "best basis" from which to find the "most just" solution, and that recognition of these principles would create favorable conditions for a solution of the problem and would open the possibility of convoking a conference.

When asked if Hanoi recognized that realization of its proposed "principle of withdrawal" of American forces would depend upon the "conclusions of a negotiation," Bo responded "exactly," and indicated that if there were agreement on the "bases," the "ways and means" of application of "principles" would be found and in a peaceful manner; the possibilities were many; a way out (*porte de sortie*) should be found for the US; "our suggestion humiliates no one."

This happening, which occurred on May 18, was first reported by a Quai official to the US Embassy's Political Counsellor in Paris unofficially on May 19, in a highly glossed version, making it appear that the DRV was clearly responding to the bombing pause by a significant softening of its position on "prior conditions." In the official version that Lucet, the Director of Political Affairs of the French Foreign Office conveyed to the DCM on May 20, however, the continued ambiguity of the DRV position -- as to whether or not recognition of the four points remained a precondition to talks of any sort -- was fully revealed.

This ambiguity was in no sense resolved a few weeks later, when Blair Seaborn raised this question with the DRV Foreign Minister in Hanoi. The U.S. had asked Seaborn in late May to seek an appointment with Pham

Van Dong and on its behalf reiterate the March message and U.S. determination to persist in the defense of South Vietnam, to regret that Hanoi had not responded positively to the various recent initiatives, including the bombing pause, and to state that, nevertheless, the United States remained ready "to consider the possibility of a solution by reciprocal actions on each side." If the Vietnamese brought up Pham Van Dong's four points, Seaborn was authorized to endeavor to establish whether Hanoi insisted that they be accepted as the condition for negotiations. On June 3, Seaborn succeeded in gaining an audience with the DRV Foreign Minister (and concurrent Deputy Premier) Nguyen Duy Trinh, who reluctantly heard him out after stating that the U.S. position was too well known to require restatement. Trinh's reaction to the message was totally negative, and in the exchange preceding its recitation he studiously avoided going beyond the vague statement that Pham Van Dong's four points were the "basis for solution of the Vietnam question." 144/

As there was considerable misunderstanding concerning the Mai Van Bo approach of May 18, and misleading accounts of it were circulating, the State Department informed several U.S. ambassadors (Saigon, Paris, Bonn) of what it considered the true facts in the case. 145/

Facts are that bombing was actually resumed on morning May 18 Saigon time. Subsequently on morning May 18, Paris time, but undoubtedly on antecedent instructions, DRV economic delegate in Paris, Mai Van Bo, approached Gual urgently for appointment. His message was to explain negative Hanoi attitude toward Indian proposal (cessation of hostilities on both sides and Afro-Asian force) but second, and more important, to discuss Pham Van Dong's four points originally stated April 8 and later included in Hanoi statement referring to appeal of 17 Non-aligned nations... Bo repeated four points with slight variations from public statements; apparently softening language by indicating that four points might be "best basis" for settlement and apparently insisting less strongly that their recognition was required as condition to negotiations. During course of conversations, French asked whether withdrawal US forces visualized as prior condition or as resulting from negotiations, and Bo responded that latter was correct.

French passed us this message on May 20 (delaying two days) so that we had in fact resumed well before we heard of it. More important, message still left ambiguity whether recognition of four points remained precondition to talks of any sort. Accordingly, we saw no reason to alter conclusion based on Hanoi propaganda denunciation of pause, plus fact that pace of Hanoi-directed basic actions in South had continued and even increased -- that Hanoi not ready to respond to pause and that we must resume.

But cf XYZ-2
below!
(May 19)

TOP SECRET - Sensitive

Subsequently, Canadian ICC Representative, Seaborn, visited Hanoi commencing May 31. He himself raised same questions with DRV Foreign Minister and response indicated DRV evasive, and in effect negative, apparently taking position recognition four points, plus some element US withdrawal, were preconditions to any talks.

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